MARKINGS ON ORACLE OSTRACA FROM
DEIR EL MEDINA – CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Due to the archaeological methodology and the recording techniques at the time of excavation, the exact find spots of most artefacts found at Deir el-Medina have not been published.[1] The location of larger artefacts has often been indicated in general terms (i.e. mentioning the room of a particular house), while the find location of most textual materials (i.e. ostraca and papyri) remained often unpublished. However, some ostraca had been marked with numbers and letters by the excavators. For example, a group of ostraca had been marked with "S 3" in a circle. During the work on *The Deir el Medina Database* project these modern marks could be linked to some notes of Bruyère's excavation of the season of 1934-35 in Clère's notebooks. Demarée discovered that all these ostraca have been excavated on the same day in a certain room of a certain house.[2] It is highly probable that 'S' is an abbreviation of the French word '*salle*'. Hence, the ostraca marked with "S 3" have probably been found in the 3rd room of a particular house.

The content of most of these ostraca are oracle questions.[3] This is particularly interesting, because Bruyère mentioned that he had found a group of unspecified oracle ostraca in house S.O. IV.[4] Thus it is highly probable that Bruyère referred to the group of texts discussed below.

In the door between the 3rd room and the 4th room, a standing king wearing a wig is depicted (fig. 1). The iconography identifies the king as being Amenhotep I – the so-called '*Amenophis de la ville*'[5] (*pꜣ nb pꜣ dmj*), who acted as oracle god in Deir el-Medina.[6]

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[1] B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934 à 1935)*, III (FIFAO 16; Cairo 1939).

[2] Cf. remarks on O. IFAO 696 in The Deir el Medina Database, URL: www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html.

[3] Other ostraca bearing the marking "S 3" are: O. DeM 133 (an oracle decision record), O. DeM 204, (recto: hymn to Amun and verso: oil provision), O. DeM 1664 (recto: duplicate of P. Lansing 9,8), and an ostracon bearing a name tag (O. IFAO 921 "Parahotep").

[4] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934 à 1935*, III, 321.

[5] Ibid.

[6] A.G. McDowell, *Jurisdiction in the Workmen's Community of Deir el Medîna* (Egyptologische Uitgaven 5; Leiden, 1990), 107-141.
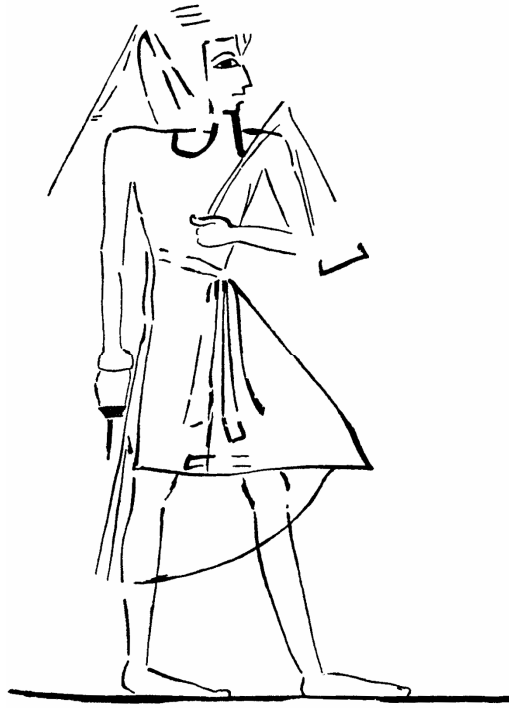
Fig. 1. Amenhotep *pꜣ nb pꜣ dmj*, Bruyère, *Rapport 1934 à 1935*, III, 322, fig. 192.

THE MARKS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

Oracle procedures were probably performed during processions of the king and not within houses, but the occurrence of both the depiction and the ostraca in the same setting is quite striking.

The oracle could be consulted to solve disputes at village level. The god was addressed by the advice-seeking party personally and orally, but written evidence is preserved in the form of oracle questions that have been written on ostraca. These ostraca usually deal with the normal affairs of daily life as, for example, theft (e.g. O. DeM 795: Was it Amenmose who has stolen the meat?). Non-criminal affairs could also be handled by the oracle, for example, whether or not one shall accept commodities for a certain price (e.g. O. DeM 812: Is it good, the ox for 109 *deben*?).

Some oracle ostraca bear marks on verso. These marks include monoconsonantal (⟐, ⬚,
│, ⌁) and polyconsonantal (⟟, ⟤) hieratic or hieroglyphic signs, determinatives (⟜, ∫) and in one case possibly a number (∩). Other marks are less clear: one mark looks like *sphr* at first and another one has been interpreted as *pꜣ*-bird.

This article aims at scrutinizing the purpose of these marks.

recto   verso

(32) Ostr. IFAO nº 693.

Fig. 2. O. IFAO 693 = Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 17, pl. II (no. 32).

recto   verso

(29) Ostr. IFAO nº 696.
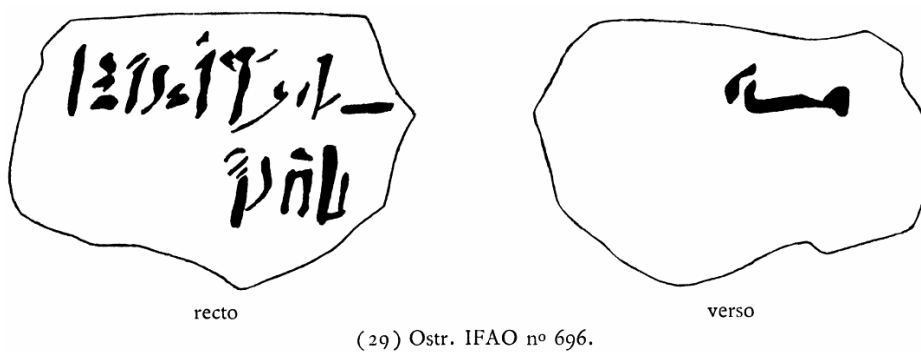
Fig. 3. IFAO 696 = Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 16, pl. I (no. 29).

recto   verso
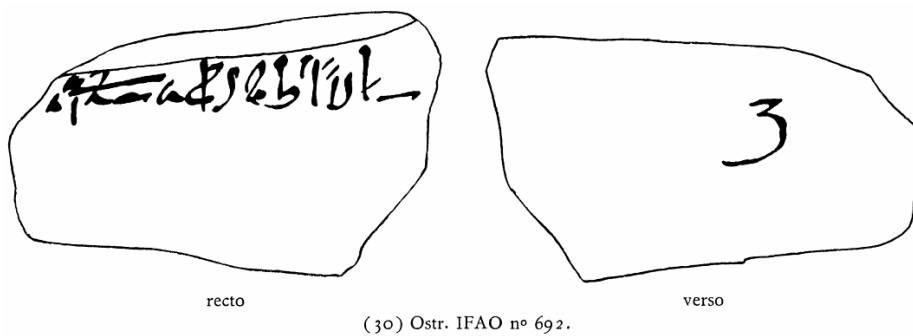
(30) Ostr. IFAO nº 692.

Fig. 4. O. IFAO 692 = Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 17, pl. II (no. 30).

MARKS TO INDICATE THE 'CORRECT' ANSWER TO THE GOD

After being consulted, the god's response was either positive or negative.[7] Earlier publications often suggest that oracles were a means of the abuse of power by the priests,[8] but these ideas cannot explain why people made their decisions dependent on the movements of a cult idol.[9] Nevertheless, the marks may have been added on verso to make sure that the response of the god would be a meaningful answer to the advice-seeking person. In fact, that would mean that the oracle ostraca would have been lying in front of the god with verso above. The marks would then be visible to the god and would "let the god know" which answer he should choose.

O. IFAO 693 might support this interpretation (fig. 2):[10] (*j*)*n jr ṯ3tj jt3 p3* 5 *ʿḏd.w* = Will the vizier take the five boys? The ostracon is marked with the forepart of a lion 🐾, Gardiner F4, on verso. As *ḥ3.t* means something like front and related terms, the marking could have indicated to the god to move forward in order to indicate a positive answer.

The same is true for IFAO 696 (fig. 3),[11] which is also marked with the forepart of a lion: (*j*)*n jw=f w3ḥ=w ḥr s.t=w* = Will he put them on their place?

The negative response might have been written on O. IFAO 692[12] (fig. 4) ((*j*)*n jw=w sḫ3=j n ṯ3tj* = Will they mention me to the vizier?), which has been marked with the owl 🦉, Gardiner G17. In this case we could understand the *m* as indication of the vetitive or as an abbreviation of *tm* or *mn*.

Černý argued that such a marking would have been visible not only to the god but also to the witnesses of the oracle procedure.[13] An obvious marking would have disturbed the faith of the villagers in the god's decision.[14] Another counter-argument would be that one might rather expect a term opposing *ḥ3.t* such as 'back' or 'backwards' and not *m* for the negative expression. No such term is known on oracle ostraca.

For the ostraca marked with *ḥ3.t*, it might be an appealing explanation. It has not yet been considered when the ostraca where marked and by whom. Černý apparently assumed that the marking would indicate fraud, either on part of the priests or as an attempt of the advice-seeking person to influence the god's decision. However, somebody could also have marked the ostraca after the oracle procedures as a note for future reference.

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[7] The actual reaction by the god is subject to debate. For a summary of interpretations: J. Černý, 'Egyptian Oracles', in R.A. Parker, *A Saite Oracle Papyrus From Thebes in the Brooklyn Museum [Papyrus brooklyn 47.218.3]* (Providence, RI, 1962), 35-48.

[8] E.g. U. Luft, *Die ägyptische Theokratie. Ihr Werden und ihre Ausstrahlung auf die Mythenschreibung* (Diss.; Leipzig, 1970), 12f; cf. M. Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft in Ägypten am Ende des Neuen Reichs. Ein religionsgeschichtliches Phänomen und seine sozialen Grundlagen*, (ÄUAT 21; Wiesbaden, 1994), 135.

[9] Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft*, 135.

[10] J. Černý, 'Nouvelle série de questions adressées aux oracles', *BIFAO* 41 (1942), 17.

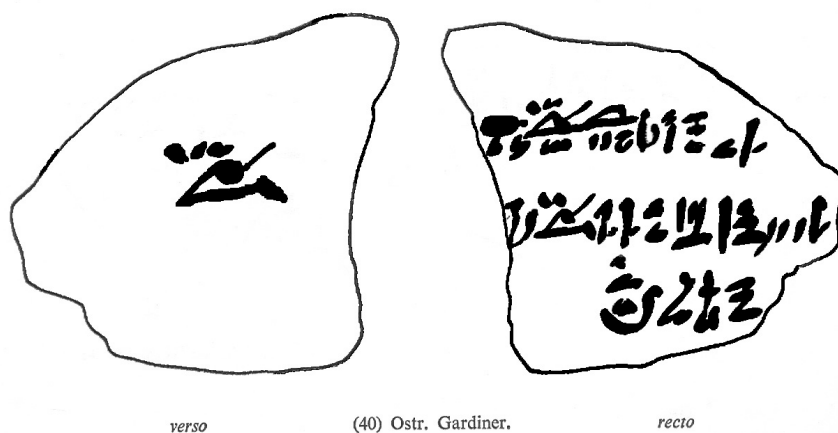[11] Ibid., 16.

[12] Ibid., 17.

[13] Ibid., 21.

[14] Ibid.

verso   (40) Ostr. Gardiner.   recto

Fig. 5. O. Gardiner 1010 = Černý, *BIFAO* 72, 51, pl. XV (no. 40).

verso   (39) Ostr. Clère.   recto
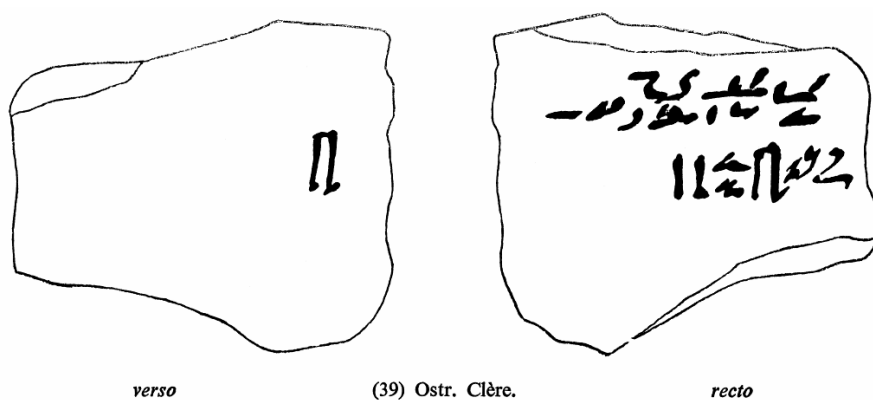
Fig. 6. O. Clère 2 = Černý, *BIFAO* 72, 50, pl. XV (no. 39).

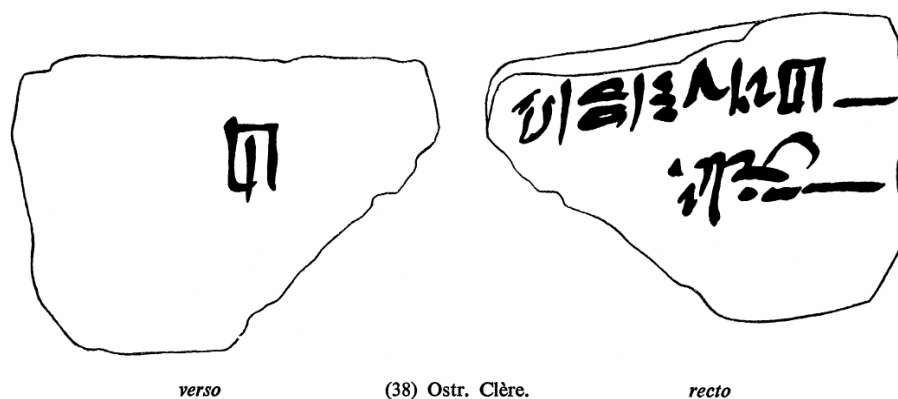verso   (38) Ostr. Clère.   recto

Fig. 7. O. Clère 1 = Černý, *BIFAO* 72, 50, pl. XV (no. 38).

MARKS TO INDICATE TO THE GOD THAT THERE ARE ORACLE QUESTIONS SPREAD ON THE GROUND

Černý suggested the oracle ostraca may have been laid on the ground where the god, carried by priests in a bark, took a break.[15] The marks could have enabled the god to distinguish the oracle ostraca from the other potsherds and pieces of limestone lying on the ground.[16] As he admitted such an interpretation is highly questionable.[17] Although there may be exceptions,[18] it seems to be most probably that the oracle at Deir el Medina was consulted orally. Why would somebody spread marked oracle ostraca on the ground first and then proceed to consult the oracle orally? Also the variety of marks points against an incidental use.

MARKS TO PROVIDE A 'TIMETABLE' FOR THE GOD

Grandet has supported Černý's idea that the marks can be explained from the manner of how the oracle procedure took place. He has suggested that the marking might be explained as a hint for the god that these ostraca should have been handled first, at the beginning of the oracle procedure.[19]

MARKS AS ABBREVIATIONS OF THE CONTENT OF THE ORACLE QUESTION

For other ostraca Grandet offers a different explanation. He shows that the hieratic signs written on the verso were often an abbreviation of the first or the most important question written on recto.[20] For example, verso of O. Gardiner 1010 (fig 5)[21] is marked with the eye touched up with paint ☜, Gardiner D6. The eye is the determinative of the word *ḳd.w* – 'dreams' on recto, which is definitely a keyword of this oracle question (*jr nꜣ ḳd.w nty jw=w ḥr ptr=w nꜣ*[22] *nfr.w*? = Will the dreams one will see be good?).

Another positive evidence for Grandet's theory is O. Clère 2 (fig. 6)[23] which is marked with the scribe's outfit, 𓏞 Gardiner Y3, and whose content is indeed related to two scribes: *ḏ(j)=j wꜥ wp n pꜣ sš* 2? – 'I gave a *wp*[24] to the two scribes' or 'Did I give a *wp* to the two scribes?'

All these examples are convincing and Grandet's theory seems to be correct.

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[15] Ibid., 22.

[16] Ibid., 22-23.

[17] Ibid., 23-24.

[18] The usual wording *ꜥš* can mean both, to speak aloud or to read: *Wb*. I, 227, but we have evidence that written petitions could be presented before the god: Černý, in Parker, *Saite Oracle Papyrus*, 43.

[19] P. Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques non littéraires de Deîr el-Médînéh*, VIII (DFIFAO 39; Cairo, 2000), 11.

[20] Ibid.

[21] J. Černý, 'Troisième série de questions adressées aux oracles', *BIFAO* 72 (1972), 51.

[22] Some oracle questions can be introduced with *nꜣ* instead of *jn*: Grandet, *Catalogue*, VIII, 8.

[23] Černý, *BIFAO* 72, 50.

[24] Ibid. According to Černý the translation "knife" is not very probable, since the word is determined with the wood determinative ⌐.
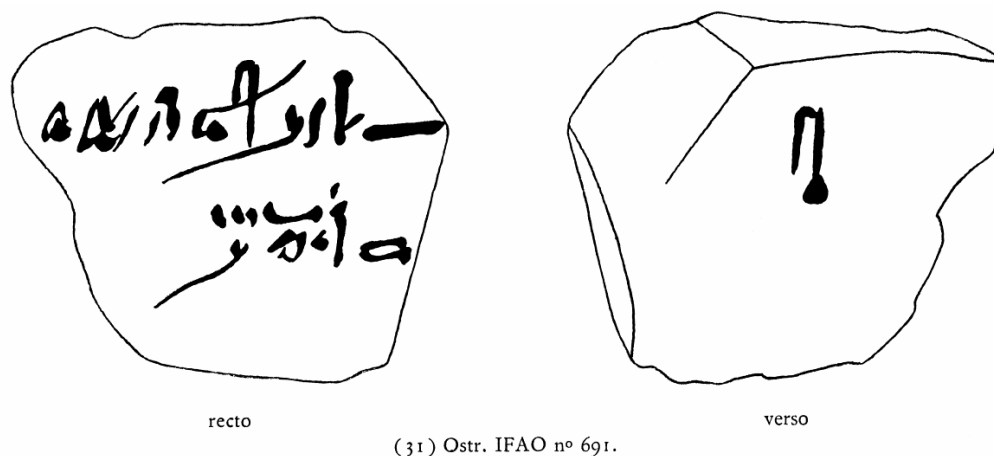
recto   verso

(31) Ostr. IFAO nº 691.

Fig. 8. O. IFAO 691 = Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 17, pl. II (no. 31).

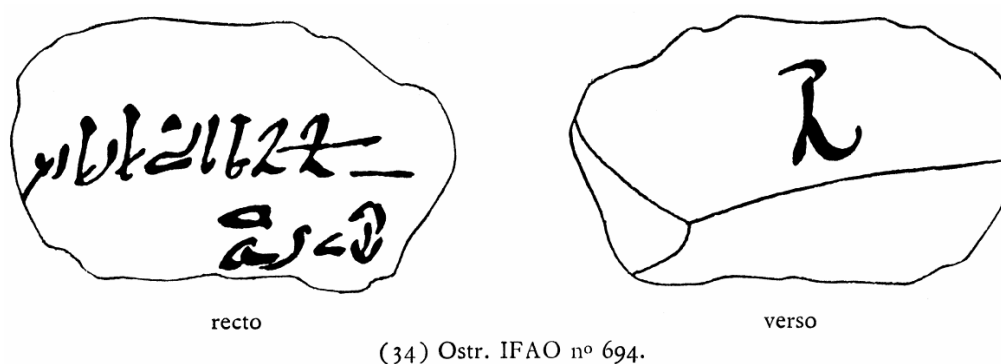recto   verso

(34) Ostr. IFAO nº 694.

Fig. 9. O. IFAO 694 = Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 18-19, pl. III (no. 34).

The abbreviation theory by Grandet, however, is not universally valid. For example, O. Clère 1 (fig. 7)[25] is marked with the reed shelter, ⬚ Gardiner O4[26], on verso. Although the reed shelter appears on verso in a keyword, namely in *ḥꜣb*, it seems less convincing that someone chose the monoconsonantal sign of the reed shelter to abbreviate the context on verso. Instead, one might expect a more meaningful sign as, for example, the leg to indicate the movement. Strictly speaking, Grandet is correct here again: '(*j*)*n ḥꜣb*(*=j*) *ḥr=w n mꜣꜥ.t*? Is it true what that I have written about them?'

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[25] Ibid.

[26] O. IFAO 681 is also marked with the reed shelter. Recto is inscribed with: (*j*)*n ꜥḏꜣ nꜣ ḏd*…Is it a lie, namely what (someone) said? The ostracon is broken and its content not fully clear. Therefore it shall be omitted in this paper.

Similar to O. Clère 1 is O. IFAO 691 (fig. 8),[27] which may be marked with folded-cloth-sign ‖ Gardiner S29 and the main verb on recto is *smtr* – 'to question', or as Černý and Grandet interpret it *sšm* – 'to lead':[28] (*j*)*n jw=f smtr=j r ḥꜥ.t=f* = Will he question me himself? However, the reading 's' on verso is questionable. One would expect the sign being written in one piece and not in two lines. Moreover the thick end of the right stroke appears to be odd. Could we read *sš* here? Following Černý's and Grandet's reading one might then argue for *sš* abbreviating *sšm*.

O. IFAO 694 (fig. 9)[29] is marked with the leg Gardiner D54 ∫ on verso, but no leg appears on recto. One could argue that the leg on verso could indicate the movement of the appearing: '(*j*)*n ṯꜣy jw jw=f ḫpr r=j* – Is it a blame that will happen to me?' But such an abbreviation seems to be subject to debate.

The meaning of the marks ∫ and the ‖ remains unclear. Even more questionable is the marking on O. DeM 817.[30] Grandet reads number '10' on the verso. On the recto "The house of Anynakht" is stated. The meaning of this phrase could be explained in the "*tirage au sort*" as Černý called it.[31] During the "*tirage au sort*" a list of houses could be read to the oracle and the god could then choose, for example, the location of hidden goods that had been stolen.[32] The fact that nine paper strips have been found at Deir el-Medina may support Grandet's idea that we are dealing with a series of analogue questions.[33] A reading as *t* or *r*, however, appears to be more probable. An explanation of either reading is difficult. We may also deal with a scrawl.

Another problematic case is O. DeM 983.[34] Grandet translates "My [good Lord?], the court of the tomb, [shall one?] find it planted?"[35] The reading *dgj/dgꜣ* with the *sš*-sign instead of the *g* or *ḳ* is nowhere attested in Lesko or Erman and Grapow. But the reading of the *sš*-sign as *g* is known from the word for Koptos (*Wb*. V, 163: *gb.tjw*). It is a singular spelling with no further references until now. The meaning of the question is uncertain. Even considering different translations of *dgj/dgꜣ*, such as 'to cover' or 'to erect', does not shed more light on the content.

On verso Grandet reads: "*pꜣ* (?)". However, *pꜣ* looks different in the known palaeographies. One is tempted to read the sign as a mirrored cobra at first, but signs were rarely mirrored in hieratic.[36] Moreover, a link of a mirrored cobra to the context on recto seems to be difficult to explain. So one may tend to read the sign as a scrawl. Still, the whole context remains enigmatic.

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[27] Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 17.

[28] Grandet, *Catalogue*, VIII, 11.

[29] Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 18-19.

[30] Grandet, *Catalogue*, VIII, 72 and 206.

[31] J. Černý, 'Le tirage au sort', *BIFAO* 40 (1941), 135-141.

[32] As illustrated by O. Gardiner 4: S. Allam, *Hieratische Ostraka und Papyri aus der Ramessidenzeit* (URAÄ 1; Tübingen, 1973), 151-152, no. 147.

[33] Grandet, *Catalogue*, VIII, 10-11.

[34] P. Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques non littéraires de Deîr el Médînéh*, IX (DFIFAO 41 ; Cairo, 2003), 148 and 436.

[35] Ibid., 148.

[36] The mirrored *rwḏ*-sign marked in the mastaba of Khentika in Dakhla mentioned by Andrássy during her conference lecture is perhaps incidental: G. Castel, L. Pantalacci, N. Cherpion, *Le Mastaba de Khentika. Tombeau d'un gouverneur de l'Oasis à la fin de l'Ancien Empire*, II (FIFAO 40/2; Cairo, 2001), 95, nr. 69b.

Another difficult case is O. IFAO 880.[37] Here the context is too destroyed to reconstruct the context. Nevertheless the ostracon is interesting because there is another marking on verso, namely the mouth ⟨⟩, Gardiner D21. On recto "As to the … it is good and it … will happen" is written.

1. *jr pꜣy ḫnjw*
2. *…jw=f nfr jw*
3. *ḫpr p[w]*

Grandet argues in favour of interpreting the sign on verso as an abbreviation for (*j*)*r* following his abbreviation theory.[38] This does not seem to be convincing.

WORKMEN'S MARKINGS?

Černý rejected the idea that the marks were used to indicate persons. He thought the people at Deir el Medina could have used the short names known from other sources and that there would have been no reason to invent new short names. Moreover, according to Černý, one could have written the full names on the oracle ostraca without much greater effort.[39] However, Haring has proven recently that marks were indeed used to indicate persons.[40]

On recto of O. DeM 804 the following text is written: '(*jn*) *rmṯ smd.t bnr*? = (Is it) a man of the outside *smd.t*/assistance personnel?' Perhaps someone had committed a crime and the oracle was questioned whether the guilty one had to be searched among the villagers or outside.

Verso is less clear. Černý has read *smtr* here,[41] Grandet reads *nfr nb*(?),[42] and *The Deir el Medina Database* reads *spḫr*. At a first glance all these readings are not convincing because they are only possible if one reads the hieratic in a mirror-inverted way, which would be odd for hieratic writing. As it turns out a mirror-inverted reading makes indeed much more sense here. In fact, Grandet has presented a mirror-inverted photograph in his publication.[43] If we re-invert the photograph, all readings quoted above become clear. Grandet's reading *nfr nb* is still the most convincing one. The marking is probably an identity marking: *nfr nb* is well-known as such from Deir el Medina.[44] Interpreting it as identity mark seems to make more sense than the other readings *spḫr* or *smtr*, 'copied' or 'checked'. Why would someone indicate on an ostracon that it was copied? In fact, *spḫr* is only occasionally being used meaning 'copied' (e.g. P. CG 51189) or 'to register' (e.g. in the Late Ramesside Letters, P. Leiden I, 370). The regular word to indicate a copy in the Egyptian administrative language would be *mj.t.y*.[45]

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[37] Černý, *BIFAO* 72, 60.

[38] Grandet, *Catalogue*, VIII, 11.

[39] Černý, *BIFAO* 41, 22.

[40] B.J.J. Haring, 'Towards decoding the necropolis workmen's funny signs', *GM* 178 (2000), 45-58.

[41] Grandet, *Catalogue* VIII, 68.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid. 199.

[44] A close parallel is: O. Turin CG 57008 (López, J., *Ostraca Ieratici N. 57000-57092*, *Catalogo del museo Egizio di Torino, Serie seconda – collezioni*, vol. III, Milan 1978, 19 and pl. 9). The sign in question appears on recto at the end of column 4.

[45] K. Donker van Heel and B.J.J. Haring, *Writing in a Workmen's Village. Scribal Practice in Ramesside Deir el-Medina* (Egyptologische Uitgaven 16; Leiden, 2003), 94-97.

The interpretation of marks as workmen's or identity markings raises the question whether the other signs might also be identity marks. This would be especially tempting for those marks as to which we could not yet present a conclusive explanation. Although these markings differ from those we already know, there may be more. But what would be the use of workmen's markings on the verso of the oracle question ostraca? Could those markings indicate the identity of the advice seeking parties acting on recto?

CONCLUSION

To sum up, there is no comprehensive interpretation which would include all markings. It is, however, possible that there are different explanations for different marks. Not all marks must have had the same purpose. I would not reject the explanation that the marks should indicate directions of movements as sharply as Černý did. Somebody may have marked the ostraca as a memorandum of the god's decision. For other ostraca, Grandet's idea of marks abbreviating the context on recto makes sense. Yet another ostracon may have been marked with an identity mark.

In conclusion we may state that that the large number of ostraca bearing both marks, the modern mark "S 3" and the ancient one, may not be coincidental. Not only the oracle ostraca but also some administrative and literary texts bear the marking 'S 3'.[46] Perhaps we are dealing with at least a part of an archive. Perhaps all these texts have been collected for some kind of personal reference by the inhabitant of the house S.O. IV. The ostracon bearing a name tag (O. IFAO 921 "Parahotep")[47] does not provide any clue. Parahotep inhabited the house in the Nineteenth Dynasty,[48] while the ostraca are from the Twentieth Dynasty. Unfortunately, we do not know who lived there during the Twentieth Dynasty and collected this archive.

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[46] See above note 3.

[47] Unpublished, Černý's Notebook: 105.94; cf. R.J. Demarée, K. Donker van Heel, B.J.J. Haring, J. Toivari-Viitala, The Deir el-Medina Database, URL: http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html.

[48] B.G. Davies, *Who is Who at Deir el-Medina. A Prosopographic Study of the Royal Workmen's Community* (Egyptologische Uitgaven 13; Leiden, 1996), 150.